Cynthia Gorney was a reporter for The Washington Post Style section when she won the ASNE award in 1980 for feature writing. She left the paper in 1991 to work on a book, Articles of Faith: A Frontline History of the Abortion Wars, published in 1997. She now teaches journalism at the University of California in Berkeley.

Anyone who would like to reclaim the profile as a newspaper art form should read and re-read Cynthia Gorney's character sketch of Dr. Seuss. It is a story grounded in solid research, built upon thorough reporting and expressed in a writing voice that echoes the whimsical genius of its subject.

Gorney won the ASNE award at the age of 26 for a collection of stories astonishing in diversity for a writer so young. In addition to the Seuss profile, she wrote about frog jumping contests, about political assassins and about women suffering from a terrible illness.

Gorney's eye for detail is exhibited richly in the Seuss piece. Readers learn that Seuss has a dog that he might have drawn, that There's a Wocket in My Pocket translates to Ik heb een Gak in Myn Zak in the Netherlands, that Seuss keeps his father's rifle target on the wall as a spur toward perfection.

Detail, observation, telling anecdote, revealing quotation, testimony of friends and family, biography, history, reading and research—these are the building blocks with which Gorney constructs her celebration of Seuss' life and work.

Gorney worked this magic with the help of her editor, a relationship that could serve as a model for all writers and editors. "What makes an editor great is support. I don't know a writer who isn't insecure. An editor has to say: 'We think you're wonderful, we know you can do wonderful work.' Even when your work is terrible."

And when a story needed more work, her editor would not seize control of it. Instead, he turned it back to Gorney for revision: "A great editor will make you feel like a real trouper," she said, "a truly talented person for being able to fix a story, for being able to send something in that's flawed and then make it better."

How did such a young writer develop such skill and sensitivity? "You have to read a lot," she said. "And when you find a writer you love, you read everything you can get your hands on by that writer."

And this, for Gorney, is the essence of feature writing: "You have to be passionately interested in everything. You have to want to learn..."
about frogs or cancer or assassins, everything there is to know. You have to know five times as much as you’re ever going to use in the story.”

Dr. Seuss: Wild Orchestrator of Plausible Nonsense for Kids

THE WASHINGTON POST • MAY 21, 1979

LA JOLLA, Calif.—One afternoon in 1957, as he bent over the big drawing board in his California studio, Theodor Seuss Geisel found himself drawing a turtle.

He was not sure why.

He drew another turtle and saw that it was underneath the first turtle, holding him up.

He drew another, and another, until he had an enormous pileup of turtles, each standing on the back of the turtle below it and hanging its turtle head, looking paired.

Geisel looked at his turtle pile. He asked himself, not unreasonably. What does this mean? Who is the turtle on top?

Then he understood that the turtle on top was Adolf Hitler.

“I couldn’t draw Hitler as a turtle,” Geisel says, now hunched over the same drawing board, making pencil scribbles of the original Yertle the Turtle drawings as he remembers them. “So I drew him as King What-ever-his-name-was, King” (scribble), “of the Pond” (scribble). “He wanted to be king as far as he could see. So he kept piling them up. He conquered Central Europe and France, and there it was.”

(Scribble.)

“Then I had this great pileup, and I said, ‘How do you get rid of this impostor?’

“Believe it or not, I said, ‘The voice of the people.’ I said, ‘Well, I’ll just simply have the guy on the bottom burp.’”

Geisel looks up from his drawing board and smiles—just a little, because a man is taking his picture and he has never gotten used to people who want to take his picture.

Dr. Seuss. American institution, wild orchestrator of plausible nonsense, booster of things that matter (like fair play, kindness, Drum-Tumpted Smurms, Hooded Kooplers, and infinite winding

spools of birthday hot dogs), detractor of things that don’t (like bullying, snobbery, condescension, gravity and walls), is 75 years old this year.

As usual, he is somewhat embarrassed by all the fuss.

“It’s getting awful,” Geisel says, “because I meet old, old people, who can scarcely walk, and they say, ‘I was brought up on your books.'” It’s an awful shock.”

There is probably not a single children’s book author in America who has matched the impact, popularity and international fame of the spare, bearded California prodigy who signs his books Dr. Seuss.

Since 1936, when Ted Geisel the advertising illustrator first wrote And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street, his books have sold 80 million copies in this country alone.

Mulberry Street was an effort, he explained later, to expel from his brain the maddening rhythm of a ship engine he had heard during the whole of a transatlantic voyage (da da Da da da Da da Da da da da da da da da da da da da).

The late Bennett Cerf—at a time when his Random House writers included William Faulkner and John O’Hara—is on record as having called Geisel the only genius of the lot.

The drawings, manuscripts, and half-formed doodles of Dr. Seuss (who did not officially become a doctor until 1936, when Dartmouth College made him an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters), are kept in locked stacks of the Special Collections division of the UCLA library. He won two Academy Awards for his World War II era documentary film and one for the cartoon “Gerald McBoing-Boing,” which he created. His books are published in about 45 countries outside the United States, including Brazil, Japan, the entire British Commonwealth and the Netherlands, where There’s A Wocket in My Pocket translates to Ik heb een Gah in Myn Zak!

On his last visit to Australia, his plane was met by reporters, television cameras, person-sized Cats in Hats, small children with “I love you, Dr. Seuss” badges, and a newspaper headline that read “Dr. Seuss Is Here.” An official in the Afghan embassy sent him a collection of brilliant blue sculpted animals with mysterious shapes and corkscrew necks, all made according to traditional design in a tiny Afghanistan town whose name Geisel could never pronounce, but which he says has been unofficially renamed Seussville. “Somebody discovered they were stealing my stuff 3,000 years ago,” Geisel says, gazing down admiringly at a small sort of yak. “They’re pretty good Seuss, though.”
Geisel has lived for 30 years in La Jolla, which is a coastal town just north of San Diego that has developed a flowery, almost Caribbean sparkle as the wealthy build homes up the side of the mountain. At the very top of one of the mountains, with the diminishing acres of wild land to the east and to the west the wide blue curve of the Pacific, Geisel and his wife Audrey share an old stucco observatory tower and the elegant, hiker-skelter maze of rooms they have built around it. "It just grew," Audrey Geisel said. "Seuss-like."

They have a swimming pool, a small Yorkshire terrier whose front end is indistinguishable from the back at first glance ("I've been accused of having drawn him," Geisel says), and a gray Cadillac Seville with GRINCH license plates—which took them several years to obtain, because when they first applied they learned that an ardent Seuss-lover with four children had already put GRINCH on the license plates and both sides of his RV. He finally moved to Iowa City and released GRINCH back to the Geisels, with a note of apology for having hogged it so long.

San Diego children know Dr. Seuss lives in a white castle on the hill, and on occasion they will pack up peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and set out for the summit, seeking an audience. Mrs. Geisel has come to expect this, "Breathing on the intercom," she calls it. Geisel has no children of his own (Mrs. Geisel, whom he married 12 years ago after the death of his first wife, has two from a previous marriage), and although he is almost always polite to his callers, the sheer numbers of intercom breathers sometimes overwhelm him.

He cannot answer all his letters, either, because they come every month by the hundreds to his home and the Random House offices in New York—love letters, valentines, air letters from India and New Zealand, photographs of cakes decorated with Hippohelmers or Logaxes, various homemade varieties of Oobleck, the nasty green slime that rains on Bartholomew Cubbins; and in one dismaying delivery, Geisel says, a carefully wrapped package of green eggs and ham.

"These days I spend my birthday in Las Vegas," Geisel says, with unconvincing grumpiness. "Nobody will look for a children's book author in Las Vegas."

He is a private, engaging, intensely driven man, with a lean and sharp-nosed look that gives him an air of severity at first. His house is scattered with his own paintings and busts of creatures unlike anything anybody ever saw before, and as he leads visitors through the halls he makes congenial introductions, as though presenting board-

ers: "This is a green cat in the Uleburg, Finland subway . . . this is a cat who was born on the wrong side of town . . . this is my religious period. This is Archbishop Katz . . . this is called, 'Good god, do I look as old as all that?'

He will not wear conventional neckties—only bow ties. He reads paperback books—history, biography, detective novels—so voraciously that his wife makes regular bookstore runs (often to a certain store that saves new books for him in a special Geisel cubbyhole) and then staples the paperbacks away so she can hand him new ones in the evening, one at a time. He reads for distraction. He needs it. When he is at work, the names, the verse, the story line, the colors, the shapes and sizes of his extraordinary characters all press upon him. He tapes the working drawings to the wall and stares at them, rearranging, reading aloud to himself, feeling the rhythm of the words.

In his new book, a volume of tongue twisters coming out in the fall, Geisel has drawn a green parrot. He has studied all the colors on the Random House art department printing chart—his usual procedure—looking for the printer's ink shade that most closely matches his working drawings in colored pencil. There are 60 different shades of green on the chart, and Geisel cannot find the right one. This one is too yellow, that one too red. He does not explain to the art department why each green is wrong—just not pazzotty enough, or something.

They know better than to ask. They will have the printer make up the precise shade of green.

"His color sense," says Grace Clarke, executive art director of the Random House junior books division, "is the most sophisticated I've ever run into." Geisel had to completely relearn color during the last two years, after undergoing an operation for removal of a cataract. The right saw brilliant color, following the operations; the other eye, which still has a small cataract, sees everything like Whistler's Mother. The second cataract is to be removed next year, after which, says Geisel, deadpanned, "They claim I'll be as good as Picasso."

Geisel does not read children's literature, unless he is editing it, which is part of his job as the founder and head of the special early readers' Random House Division called Beginner Books. Then he is fierce in his judgment, dismissing instantly the noxious breed of children's books that soo and munch and pat little heads.

"Bunny-bunny books," he calls them. "Sugar plums, tinsel, whimsy." He once turned down a manuscript from Truman Capote.
(Diplomatically, neither Geisel nor the Random House people remember what it was about.) "I try to treat the child as an equal," Geisel has said, "and go on the assumption that a child can understand anything that is read to him if the writer takes care to state it clearly and simply enough."

There is a vast difference, of course, between respectful simplicity and invention, and Geisel is as mystified about as anybody—about what makes one man dull a ship engine's throat with aspirin, or neat whiskey, while another hears the beginnings of an imaginary backstreet elephant-and-giraffe parade. Geisel never set out to be a children's book writer. He was born in Springfield, Mass., the son of a German immigrant who had been, at various times, a brewer, a park superintendent, and a world champion rifle shot. Ted Geisel grew up in Springfield, graduated from Dartmouth, and spent a year at Oxford, during which time he is reported to have proposed (unsuccessfully) a new edition of Paradise Lost, which would include such illustrations as the Archangel Uriel sliding down a sunbeam with an oil can to lubricate his trip.

He lived in New York, selling drawings, stories and political cartoons to magazines of the day—Judge, Vanity Fair, the Saturday Evening Post—and for 15 years he worked in advertising for Standard Oil of New Jersey.

He drew insecticide ads, "Quick, Henry! The Fly!" That was Geisel's creation.

He illustrated two volumes of jokes, tried unsuccessfully to sell an alphabet book, and then in 1937 laid out the wonderfully paced mad fantasy of the boy named Marco in And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street. Before a publishing friend of Geisel's took the book in at Vanguard Press, 20 publishers turned it down.

He had an easier time with the next one. "I was sitting in a railroad train, going up somewhere in Connecticut," Geisel says. "And there was a fellow sitting ahead of me, who I didn't like. I didn't know who he was. He had a real ridiculous Wall Street broker's hat on, very stuffy, on this commuting train. And I just began playing around with the idea of what his reaction would be if I took his hat off and threw it out the window."

Geisel smiles a small, slightly evil smile.

"And I said, 'He'd probably just grow another one and ignore me.'"

Which gave us The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins. Boy, confronted in castle by sneaky royalty, cannot off his hat because new hats keep appearing to replace it.

"In those days 90 percent of the stuff that was written was literacy fairy tales," Geisel says. "I began to think of appearances around the castle, and one of them would be a bowman, and then it occurred to me there would also be an executioner. And I said, 'We gotta get a little bastard of a crowned prince in here.' And I would draw and write that sequence up. Then I would put it on the wall and see how they fit. I'm not a consecutive writer."

Once in a while there is an echo of something like anguish in Geisel's accounts of the workings of his own imagination—some constant, furious homage to the 1932 rifle target, its bull's-eye perforated by his father's exacting shots, that Geisel keeps mounted on the wall.

"To remind me of perfection," he says.

He will sometimes work late into the night, or break off into an entirely different project, when some flaw in a book begins to gnaw at him. He spent a full year struggling over the smallish goatherd-like creature called the Lorax. "Once he was mechanized. That didn't work. He was big at one point. I did the obvious thing of making him green, shrinking him, growing him."

And then? "I looked at him, and he looked like a Lorax."

But he was equally stumped by the story itself, a dismal tale about the Once-ler, who hacks down all the Truffula Trees to mass-produce Thneeds, thereby driving away the Swomee-Swans, starving out the Brown Bar-ba-loots, and—as the wheezing, outraged Lorax cries—"Lumping the pond where the Humming-lish hummed." It was the angriest story Geisel had ever written, and he could not figure out how to make sense of it, how to keep it from turning into a lecture—"a preaching," as Geisel says. Geisel has a horror of preachments. Audrey Geisel, who quite rightly believes that the best way to come unstuck is to stand on your head and try looking at things that way, suggested they go to Africa for a while, which they did.

"I hadn't thought of the Lorax for three weeks," Geisel says. "And a herd of elephants came across the hill—about a half mile away—one of those lucky things, that never happened since. And I picked up a laundry pad and wrote the whole book that afternoon on a laundry pad." The final version of The Lorax still begins in its ominous, haunting way:

At the far end of town
Where the Grickle-grass grows
And the wind smells
slow-and-sour when it blows.
And no birds ever sing excepting
old crows.
Is the street of the Lifted Lorax.

But it ends with some hope. One Truffula Tree seed makes it through. And that, for Geisel, redeems the preachment. Happy endings, he has said, are vital: "A child identifies with the hero, and it is a personal tragedy to him when things don't come out all right."

Geisel, in an early fit of misguided inspiration, once wrote a book for adults. "My greatest failure," he says, pulling a rare copy off the bookshelf. "This is a book that nobody bought."

Its thesis is that there were in fact seven Lady Godivas (Gussie, Hedwig, Lulu, Teenie, Mirzi, Arabella, and Doceas), each of them engaged to one of the seven Peeping Brothers. In order to avenge the unfortunate death of their father, who was tossed by an arrogant horse enroute to the Battle of Hastings, the Ladies Godiva set out to discover Horse Truths (don't look a gift horse in the mouth, and so on) while displaying limited but alluring portions of their anatomies.

"I don't think I drew proper naked ladies," Geisel says sadly. "I think their ankles came out wrong, and things like that." The book was published in 1937, priced steeply during the depression at $2 a copy, and less than a quarter of the 10,000 sold. They now go for $199 to $200. Geisel has a private fantasy about making the Godivas into an animated film, but he is not certain about how to present nudity—the ankles, and things like that.

But the bulk of Geisel's audience will always be children. "Writing for adults doesn't really interest me anymore," he said. "I think I've found the form in writing for kids, with which I can say everything I have to say a little more distinctly than if I had to put it in adult prose."

He pulls from a file some typewritten pages from his new book.
"You want to try reading one?" Geisel asks.

His visitor, reading slowly, makes a stab at it:
One year we had a Christmas banquet
With Merry Christmas Mule to munch.
But I don't think you'd care for such
We didn't like to munch mule much.

There is a rather bad moment of tongue-twisting at the end and Geisel looks delighted. "These things are written way over the ability of first-grade kids, and I think it's going to work," he said. "They're stinkers (the tongue-twisters, not the children)."